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Faking It for Real: Performativity, 'Authenticity', and the Teaching Self

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FAKING IT FOR REAL: PERFORMATIVITY, 'AUTHENTICITY', AND THE TEACHING SELF

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Introduction

The social media landscape has fundamentally reshaped the conventional and still commonplace notion of 'authenticity,' raising pressing questions over how educators might construct credible and compelling personas to facilitate student learning online. Such questions are now more important than ever in an environment where the global COVID-19 pandemic has enticed countless more teachers to explore the potentialities of the digital world for engaging with students, colleagues, and other stakeholders. This visual essay explores this issue through an examination of the author's own construction of a 'teaching self' on various social media platforms, particularly through the lens of the shelfie. The roles of performativity, playfulness, and the potential for repurposing content are shown to shed light on the complexities of what it means to convey an 'authentic' persona online.



Figure 1: A shelfie, taken 14 January 2021.

Satisfactory lighting; semi-competent framing; amateur attempt at humour via exaggerated facial expression. This photograph may be perceived by some to be 'authentic', but its performative nature also raises the question of what exactly 'authenticity' means. This theme is unpacked here in relation to the digital construction of a teaching self through an autoethnographic approach

(Ellis 2004). Given the nature of the media drawn on in what follows, the approach bears similarities to the form of micro-autoethnography applied recently in game studies, where 'short events,' often conveyed in multimedia form, are central to the self-reflection (McArthur, 2019, p. 32).

No matter what form they take, mediated identity performances are never 'unfiltered' in the pure sense that is typically implied, but comprise what Gunn Enli conceptualises as 'authenticity illusions' (2015, p. 1). Resisting the tendency to render 'authenticity' a placeholder for 'reality' or 'truthfulness', Smith and Watson likewise stress that 'virtual environments only make clearer the critique made by poststructural theorists that all self-presentation is performative, that authenticity is an effect, not an essence' (2014, p. 75). Governed by ever-changing conventions and perceptions, 'authenticity' is always contingent and seldom uniform, and social media has long seen 'emotional and intellectual resonance' take precedence over concerns about 'truth and fakeness' (Christian 2009).



Figure 2: Tweet posted on teaching account, 4 December 2020. https://twitter.com/digitalzones/status/1334833003315412994

The recent sector-wide upheaval amidst COVID-19 campus shutdowns only exacerbates the importance of exploring how educators present and perform themselves (or rather, their selves) online. Whether or not social media is harnessed for student learning directly, the plethora of

platforms and their affordances offer rich lessons to be mined in relation to performing teaching personas (Brown and Wade 2021). For several years I have taught practical digital media-making units using platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, SoundCloud, Instagram, and TikTok to encourage the building of student networks, portfolios, and learning communities.



Figure 3: Instagram post on teaching account, taken 4 March 2018. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2vC2HeAb0I/

The phenomenon of 'shelfies' has played a significant role in the pursuit of motivating and engaging students in their learning, encouraging them to step outside their comfort zones and actively engage in public social media spaces as part of their studies. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students have expressed strong views about the visibility and relatability (or lack thereof) of teacher performances online, revealing a preference for informality, playfulness, and vulnerability (Wade and Brown, 2022). Far from having a simple 'entertainment' goal, my particular (perhaps peculiar) strategies highlight the inherently playful nature of social media identity-management. As an early study of the educational use of Flickr highlighted, learning through online media-making and sharing is 'not just about words and pictures, but about the development of social and cultural knowledge and issues concerning the self' (Davies 2007, p. 562).



Figure 4: Instagram post on teaching account, taken 23 September 2019. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2vC2HeAb0I/

Playing as a Meddler-in-the-Middle and the Shelfie as Teaching Meta-Performance

Part of my personal-professional brand as a lecturer has relied for almost a decade on my inclusion of my board game collection in the background of photographs, YouTube vlogs, live broadcasts, and TikTok videos I have created to engage students. Indeed, the video thumbnails visible on certain media may be seen to comprise a form of 'shelfie' in themselves – as do the ritual taking of Zoom meeting screenshots or video captures with colleagues, industry practitioners, or students to fulfil one or more functions: to encourage participation, promote research, showcase teaching activities, or advertise events.



Figure 5: Instagram post on teaching account, taken 7 March 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMGs1RSgO2R/

Through this multi-platformed approach to delivering learning resources and assessment advice, I position myself as what Erica McWilliam coined a 'Meddler-in-the-Middle', as opposed to the 'Sage-on-the-Stage' model of a teacher who distributes learning and the 'Guide-by-the-Side' facilitator whose strategies can too readily lean toward passivity. The meta-category of 'Meddling-in-the-Middle' describes an 'active interventionist pedagogy in which teachers are mutually involved with students in assembling and/or dis-assembling knowledge and cultural products' (2009, p. 288). Indeed, the self-reflexive nature of making social media content frequently affords opportunities to explore the complexity of online performativity and 'authenticity'.



So who is the 'real me'?!? A snippet from an old endof-unit teaching video on performativity and online identity #ALM101 #ALC708



10:34 AM · Apr 10, 2018 · Twitter for Android

Figure 6: Tweet posted on teaching account, 10 April 2018. https://twitter.com/digitalzones/status/983503329962569729

The machinations of 2020 and beyond have exposed the neatly (or messily) stacked bookshelves of countless journalists, academics, and other commentators forced to record themselves on webcams while working from home. While unreliable internet connections and family interruptions mid-Zoom have often provided 'humanising' moments, the pervasiveness of book collections has only reinforced the trope of the learned person as being surrounded by wisdom set down on the page by those who came before. Further, while the 'teaching self' has long been recognised as 'often overlooked but also potentially extremely influential in wider *micro-publics*' (Barbour and Marshall, 2012), limited attention continues to be given to the subject of educator personas – even in those monographs that focus on digital work in academia (Carrigan 2019; Weller 2011).



...

Where serendipity and creative media-making meet...

Remember that journalist who had his kids barge into the room during a live interview? This happened within a few weeks of that, though we didn't go quite so viral





7:00 AM · Aug 9, 2018 · Twitter Web Client

Figure 7: Tweet posted on teaching account, 9 August 2018. https://twitter.com/digitalzones/status/1027298507906924544

My decision to line my shelves with tabletop games rather than books serves multiple purposes. First, my chosen shelfie setting might be perceived by some to subvert the stereotypical persona of a grey-bearded, tie-wearing lecturer – as one observer blogged at length about my online identity (Hanlon, 2017). Second, the connotations of playfulness engendered in gaming fit neatly with the role of creativity and experimentation in social media-making. Given that 'the self is an effect of representation – the affordances, strategies, techniques, and intended audiences – rather than one's identity being expressed through online practices' (Poletti and Rak 2014, p. 6), playful experimentation is pivotal to discovering oneself in the making. And lastly, the subversive playfulness, or playful subversiveness, of these performances again raises the question of what it means to be 'authentic' online.

One Last Shelfie: Strategic Stage Management and Being 'Real' Online



Figure 8: Instagram post on teaching account, 1 March 2019. https://www.instagram.com/p/BudE1f1AvXR/

Spontaneous moments in media-making are often viewed by audiences as 'authentic' due to their seemingly unplanned nature; however, this by no means suggests performativity is not a pivotal part of the process. Let's return to Smith and Watson's conceptualisation of 'authenticity' as artifice; as 'manufactured' stage management (2014, p. 75). Shedding any pretension – at least to oneself – that you might or even can portray what is simplistically called 'the real/true you' may, paradoxically, be a valuable step in enhancing the likelihood of being perceived as 'authentic'. Indeed, layers might be added to performances of a single shelfie in a way that drastically alters context and meaning, but nowhere can more 'truth' be found in one performance over another.



One last shelfie... With a major redeployment of furniture on the horizon, my method of media-making will no doubt change as I take the next step in evolving my online identity. Here is me celebrating the prospect of moving some very heavy boxes...



2:40 PM · Jan 14, 2021 · Twitter for Android

Figure 9: Tweet posted on teaching account, 14 January 2021. https://twitter.com/digitalzones/status/1349562042072485891



Figure 10: Instagram post on teaching account, 16 January 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CKF6aHwgISo/

The above definition should make clear something very important about *gamification*: it's not the same thing as *gaming*; it's not about making or playing games. When I've asked groups of students over the last several years if there are any 'gamers' in the room, I only ever get one or two (if any) people raising their hands. This is, in one sense, understandable, as the term 'gamer' generally conjures up images of someone who plays video games on a daily basis, someone who participates in long, late-night MMORPG sessions, or someone who owns far too many board games.



Sorry not sorry.

Figure 11: Screenshot of <u>blog post</u> on Digital Zones website, 7 February 2021.

Shelfies and similar iterations of the online self exemplify how the notion of 'authentic learning' needs to be expanded – not only for students, but for teachers – from the merely epistemological to the ontological. This requisite shift mirrors Kyungmee Lee's recent call for 'a comprehensive conceptualisation of authentic learning, as an integrated process of both knowing and becoming' (2020, p. 571). In relation to digital learning, this equates to a shift from simply knowing how to use digital technologies and locate/interpret information to how to *be* online through various forms of self-presentation. In the field of media education in particular, though arguably beyond this as well, the openness of teachers to experimenting with their digital performances is a crucial facet of motivating and engaging students in their learning.

What it means to be an 'authentic' Meddler-in-the-Middle will shift over time as storytelling forms and platforms change, but a creative and playful process of ongoing personal-professional development will set a strong foundation for the commitment to lifelong learning we seek to promote to our students. While the 'real self' can be found nowhere in this essay, one truth it might offer is that the fluid nature of social media has been prodding educators with questions of performance and 'authenticity' long before the pandemic ever hit.



Figure 12: Meme created by author, 23 May 2021.

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